

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 00364 181547Z

ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1361

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

USINT BAGHDAD

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

DIA WASHDC

USCINCEUR

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 0364

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT SY

SUBJ: SUNNI OPPOSITION BLOC FORCES CHANGES ON BAATH PARTY REGIONAL
COMMAND

REF: (A) 76 DAMASCUS 8670, (B) 76 DAMASCUS 8644, (C) 76
DAMASCUS 8116

1. SUMMARY: UNDER PRESSURE FROM SUNNI FACTION ON BAATH
PARTY REGIONAL COMMAND, LED BY RC DEPSEC GEN BAJBUJ AND
REPRESENTING POWERFUL SUNNI MILITARY OFFICERS, PRES ASAD
RECENTLY REALIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES AMONG KEY RC MEMBERS.
PRIMARY TARGET WAS RIF'AT AL-ASAD, WHO WAS SHIFTED FROM
HIGHER EDUCATION BUREAU TO YOUTH AFFAIRS. DEFMIN TLASS
ALSO REPLACED MAJ GEN IBRAHIM AS DIRECTOR OF POLITICAL
BUREAU OF MILITARY. PRES ASAD CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN EFFORT
TO MEND HIS BAATH PARTY FENCES. END SUMMARY.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 00364 181547Z

2. DCM LEARNED FROM POLITICALLY ATTUNED SYRIAN
BUSINESSMAN THAT NUMBER OF SHIFTS HAVE TAKEN PLACE
RECENTLY ON BAATH PARTY REGIONAL COMMAND. AMONG MOST
IMPORTANT WERE SHIFT OF RIF-AT AL-ASAD TO YOUTH STUDENT AFFAIRS
BUREAU AND HIS REPLACEMENT AT HIGHER EDUCATION BUREAU BY
AHMAD DIYAB; AND MAJ GEN ABD AL-GHANI IBRAHIM'S MOVE
FROM POLITICAL BUREAU OF MILITARY, WHERE HE SUPERVISED

BAATH'S MILITARY ORGANIZATION, TO PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS BUREAU. IBRAHIM WAS REPLACED BY DEFMIN TLASS. ACCORDING TO ANOTHER BUSINESSMAN, PRES ASAD HAD BECOME ANNOYED WITH INTERNAL BICKERING ON RC AND FOLLOWING SEVERAL WEEKS OF CANCELLED RC MEETINGS SUMMONED MEMBERS TO NINE-HOUR SESSION IN LATE DECEMBER. REASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES OCCURRED AT THIS MEETING.

3. EMBOFF TALKED WITH WELL-INFORMED LOCAL COLUMNIST ABOUT POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF RC SHIFTS. SOURCE SAID THAT SHIFTS AMOUNTED ALMOST TO COUP D'ETAT, AND SAID THEY RESULTED FROM CLASHES ON COMMAND BETWEEN SUNNI GROUP LED BY RC DEPSEC GEN MOHAMMAD JABIR BAJBUJ AND RIF-AT AL-ASAD. HE NOTED THAT BAJBUJ BACKED BY GROUP OF SENIOR SUNNI MILITARY OFFICERS, INCLUDING TLASS, JAMIL, DABBAGH AND/OR PRIMIN KHULAYFAWI, AND POSSIBLY COS SHIHABI AS WELL. (NOTE: SYRIAN DISSIDENT RECENTLY CONFIRMED TO EMBOFF THAT SIGNIFICANCE OF BAJBUJ OPPOSITION IS THAT HE REPRESENTS GROUP OF IMPORTANT SUNNI MILITARY OFFICERS.) ACCORDING TO SOURCE, BOTH FACTIONS WERE THREATENING TO DEMAND REGIONAL CONGRESS OF BAATH PARTY. SOURCE SAID SECTARIAN ISSUE ESPECIALLY EXPLOSIVE. THUS PRESIDENT AGREED TO TRIM HIS BROTHER'S INFLUENCE -- HE CLAIMED SOME IMPORTANT ALAWITE MILITARY OFFICERS ALSO URGING PRES TO CURTAIL RIF-AT'S ACTIVITIES -- BUT WARNED BAJBUJ TO IMPOSE SOME DISCIPLINE ON HIS FACTION AS WELL WITHIN SIX MONTHS.

4. IN SOURCE'S VIEW, FACTIONS HAVE ONLY DELAYED MORE SERIOUS CONFRONTATION FOR FEW MONTHS. HE SPECULATED THAT
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 DAMASC 00364 181547Z

WITHIN FOUR-SIX MONTHS, BOTH FACTIONS WILL BECOME DISSATISFIED WITH COMPROMISE ARRANGEMENTS. SOURCE ASSERTED THAT BAJBUJ REMAINED LOYAL TO PRES ASAD, AS DID MANY OF HIS ALLIES. HE ADMITTED, HOWEVER, THAT AGITATION AGAINST RIF-AT WOULD BE TAKEN AS INDIRECT CRITICISM OF PRES. IN HIS OPINION, TLASS BECOMING MORE POWERFUL (COMMENT: OTHER SOURCES HAVE SUGGESTED THAT TLASS MAY IN COMING FEW MONTHS BE EASED OUT OF LEADERSHIP POSITION. IT MAY BE THAT TLASS HAS BEEN GIVEN POLITICAL BUREAU SLOT IN PREPARATION FOR RELIEVING HIM OF DEFMIN PORTFOLIO). SOURCE SAID HE UNAWARE OF REASON BEHIND ABD AL-GHANI IBRAHIM'S SHIFT, BUT SPECULATED IT REFLECTED INTERNAL ALAWITE POWER STRUGGLE (COMMENT: LEADER OF DISSIDENT OFFICERS GROUP UNCOVERED IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, MAJ RIIQ NUQQARI, REPORTEDLY SERVED UNDER IBRAHIM IN POLITICAL BUREAU. THIS MAY HAVE REFLECTED UNFAVORABLY UPON IBRAHIM. POLITICAL BUREAU IS RESPONSIBLE FOR BAATH PARTY'S MILITARY CELLS. WHILE THERE IS NEED FOR PARTY TO REPAIR DISORGANIZATION AMONG ITS SUPPORTERS IN SOME PROFESSIONAL SYNDICATES --

PARTICULARLY THE DOCTORS AND ENGINEERS SYNDICATES (DAMASCUS 0047), IBRAHIM'S TRANSFER TO PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS BUREAU PRESENTLY APPEARS AS LOSS OF POWER ON HIS PART).

6. POSTPONEMENT OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN SUNNI GROUP AND RIF-AT'S SUPPORTERS HAS GIVEN PRES ASAD OPPORTUNITY TO REPAIR HIS PARTY FENCES AND CONSOLIDATE HIS SUPPORTERS. DECEMBER 31 MEDIA HIGHLIGHTED TALKS PREVIOUS DAY BETWEEN PRES AND KEY OFFICIALS OF PARTY NATIONAL COMMAND ORGANIZATION BUREAU. ACCORDING TO MEDIA, DISCUSSIONS FOCUSED ON LEBANESE SITUATION, PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS. "DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY AND SYRIA'S ROLE IN PAST PHASE REGARDING SITUATION IN AREA AND LEBANESE EVENTS IN PARTICULAR WERE ALSO DISCUSSED." BP DEPSEC GEN AHMAR AND NC MEMBER AND DIRECTOR OF ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNICATION BUREAU, BAQIR YASSIN, ATTENDED SESSIONS.
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PAGE 04 DAMASC 00364 181547Z

7. MEDIA HAVE ALSO HIGHLIGHTED ASAD'S POPULARITY WITH NON-BAATHIST POLITICAL PARTIES REPRESENTED IN PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL FRONT (PNF). JAN 2 MEDIA REPORTED CABLE SENT BY NASSERITE ARAB SOCIALIST UNION SEC GEN FAWZI KAYYALI TO PRES SADAT EXPRESSING SUPPORT FOR SYRO-EGYPTIAN SOLIDARITY. STATEMENT BY SOCIALIST UNIONIST PARTY PRAISING CREATION OF SYRO-EGYPTIAN JOINT COMMAND AS "COURAGEOUS STEP UNDERTAKEN BY PRESIDENTS ASAD AND SADAT" GIVEN FULL COVERAGE SAME DAY. TWO DAYS LATER, MEDIA REPORTED ASAD HAD RECEIVED CABLE OF SUPPORT ON HIS RAPPROCHEMENT WITH EGYPT FROM SOCIALIST UNIONIST PARTY SEC GEN AHMAD AL-ASAAD.

8. TO EMPHASIZE POINT REGIME INTENDING TO MAKE, JAN 10 PRESS FRONT-PAGED REPORT OF LECTURE ON PNF AHMAR DELIVERED TO BAATHIST CADRES AT PARTY PREPARATORY SCHOOL. AHMAR PRAISED ESTABLISHMENT OF PNF BY PRES ASAD AS SIGNIFICANT ATTEMPT TO TRANSCEND PHASE OF "CONTRADICTIONS AND SQUABBLING" AMONG DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF PROGRESSIVE FORCES IN SYRIA AND TO CREATE "NEW STAGE OF COOPERATION" AMONG THESE ELEMENTS. HE CONCLUDED BY REITERATING NECESSITY OF BAATHISTS TO SUPPORT PNF.

9. COMMENT: BAJBUJ AND HIS SUNNI SUPPORTERS HAVE SO FAR DEMONSTRATED NO WILLINGNESS TO BACK OFF FROM THEIR CONFRONTATION WITH RIF'AT. ON CONTRARY, DESPITE PRES ASAD'S EARLIER WARNING (REF B) THAT HE CONSIDERED ATTACK ON HIS BROTHER AS OPPOSITION CAMPAIGN. SUNNIS APPARENTLY UTILIZED DISAFFECTION WITH RIF-AT AMONG MANY ALAWITE OFFICERS TO PRESS THEIR DEMANDS, AND FELT CONFIDENT THEY HAD MANEUVERED

PRES AND HIS BROTHER INTO TACTICALLY WEAK POSITION. PRES
ASAD IS UNLIKELY TO REMAIN PASSIVE IN FACE OF GROWING
OPPOSITION AND EXPLOITATION OF SECTARIAN ISSUE. HE
HAS MOVED QUICKLY TO ENERGIZE BAATH PARTY CADRES FROM
NC ORGANIZATION BUREAU WHOSE JOB IS TO MAINTAIN PARTY
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PAGE 05 DAMASC 00364 181547Z

DISCIPLINE AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND
BASES. STRESS ON PNF MAY ALSO SERVE TO REMIND BAATH
THAT ASAD BROUGHT PARTY OUT OF ITS ISOLATION, AND REMIND OTHER
PARTIES IN PNF OF ASAD'S RELATIVE LIBERALISM. IF COM-
PROMISE ON RC SHOULD BREAKDOWN, ASAD WILL HAVE PLACED
HIMSELF IN STRONG DEFENSIBLE POSITION TO MAINTAIN HIS
OWN LEADERSHIP OF BAATH PARTY FACTIONS.
MURPHY

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